

Project Misplaced: The Rise and Fall of Simon Ordoubadi, Houman Mortazavi, with articles by Jacki Lyden, Tara Bahrapour, and Elham Gheytnchi, Los Angeles: Art Project Catalogue, 2004, ISBN 1-59584-000-1, 89 pp.

Witty, ironic, even surreal, yet intimately familiar, *Project Misplaced* presents a collection of twenty-seven posters conceived and designed by Houman Mortazavi, advertised in several Persian-speaking presses in Los Angeles, and posted as flyers and stickers in the Westwood area in the summer of 2003. Three articles and an interview also complement this publication. The posters depict the ambitious rise of a fictional character, Simon (Soleyman) Ordoubadi, a typically displaced immigrant who is thrown away, like most of Iranian diaspora, by forces beyond his wish or control into a society proud of its “American dream.” Such displacement, the posters show, is in fact misplacement. The rising protagonist, now debased and removed from the familiar social network that would define his identity, is suddenly conflated with the megalomaniac and ambitious multiplication of one’s potentialities. The posters chronicle the journey of a business-minded hopeful immigrant who, in response to initially innocent advertisements offering just about any services from teaching the Morse code to babysitting, tries to grab a share of the American pie in the sky. Soon, according to the testimony of the posters, Ordoubadi rises up to a self-acclaimed mystic healer of the soul with “several experimental PhDs,” then to an Iranian delegate to the United Nations, the first Iranian candidate to go to space, and eventually into a contender against Arnold Schwarzenegger in the race for California governor. Unusual? Not really. This mutant child of the triangle—mysticism, business, politics—only depicts, in a refreshingly hilarious way, the process by which the Iranian immigrant community in Los Angeles, the largest Iranian community outside the country, has been socializing and shaping up ever since the 1979 revolution. As Mortazavi writes in his prefatory remarks: “Twenty-five years after the revolution, there is a tired, frustrated and indifferent society of Iranians living the harsh realities of an American life and fantasizing the days when they were kings” (19). Simon Ordoubadi is the epitome of typical Iranian immigrants in America who, having become increasingly aware that the American promise is slipping away beyond salvage, aggressively seek to get their share in the “land of opportunity.” They are willing to emulate every day precisely those resented national characters they escaped from in the first place, especially in dealing with their immigrant compatriots. “They have run away from what they hated, only to spread it more by their practices” (19). That is why *Project Misplaced* is dedicated, among others, to “All the real Ordoubadis out there. And the Ordoubadi within us all.”

Ordoubadi’s campaign promises are perhaps most revealing of the Iranian national characters that are so much condemned rhetorically by Iranian immigrants—and that surface so vividly in immigrant communities. Ordoubadi’s strategic slogan, “Today unity, tomorrow revenge” (*emruz ettehad, farda entegam*) (or “For now just unite”) summarizes the opportunistic logic of many Iranian political parties (especially resonating in the political position of exiled Crown Prince

Reza Pahlavi), as does his appeal to President Bush to eradicate our (his?) enemy (“George you kill our enemy good”). On the other hand, he treats the large number of Iranians in Los Angeles as a birthright that should translate into an Iranian governor for California. But in this California, in a vein similar to the Israel of Ariel Sharon, he proposes to segregate predominantly Iranian communities from the rest of California by building a wall around the designated neighborhoods and the “formation of action squads to confront the influential anti-Iranian groups.”

Aside from the contents of these posters, what is perhaps equally striking is the poor quality of execution and the conspicuously bad immigrant-English. For Mortazavi who is an accomplished graphic artist and designer (one only needs to heed the professional execution of this exhibition catalogue), the posters typify the quality of ads that are published in Iranian print media outside the country. He narrates his eye-opening experiences with his Iranian clients and their total disregard for his professional opinion in design and graphics (19). In these posters Mortazavi uses the visual language of the Iranian diaspora community in Los Angeles to show that what is misplaced in the displacement every immigrant experience bears is the ability to represent home, the peregrination, and the experience of trans-cultural thrown-ness. These posters cultivate in us a certain socio-visual sensitivity. The first-generation immigrants’ tendency toward closed community relations is symptomatic of the at-loss-for-words situation they find themselves in when reaching out to the host-land. And Ordoubadi is no exception. What is important is that in this business-oriented world, money and entrepreneurial spirit supersede meaningful human communication. This is at the heart of the American promise; regardless of one’s origin and one’s communication skills, one needs to thrive for economic success in the harsh, inhospitable, and competitive world of global capitalism. To paraphrase Max Weber, the “Protestant ethic” that enabled the “spirit of capitalism” took economic success as an indication that one was among God’s “elect” and thereby reduced the termites of anxiety that quietly devoured from the inside out the early immigrant Protestant communities of America, among others. Ordoubadi’s journey from an unskilled businessman to an ambitious contender for governor of California represents the enormity of the leap an immigrant must make. In Ordoubadi’s words, “Because you are Iranian you work double hard. Why?” (77). Next thing we know, the crumbling hopes of this typical Iranian immigrant lead to the return of anxiety—an irremediable misplacement.

Behind the apparent sarcasm of the project, Ordoubadi represents failed immigrant identity. Soleyman can be easily rendered Simon, but the man behind these two names remains something of an anomaly. He is disconnected beyond hope, not only from the host community to which he remains incomprehensible (for obvious reasons), but sadly, also from his own immigrant community, which views in him the sum of what they despise in themselves but carry, in fragments and undisclosed, within themselves. The immigrants’ misplacement comes from the loss of a place in meaningful social networks they find proper to themselves.

Beyond the humor and sarcasm of these images, one finds the distressing reality of an immigrant's life. In the words of sociologist Elham Gheytanchi, "*Project Misplaced* records the misplaced ambitions and hopes of a prototypical immigrant in a globalized era. Simon Ordoubadi is the masterful creation of an artist who seeks not to glorify, denigrate or exoticize, but simply to expose us the life of an ordinary yet new transnational man" (13). And that is precisely why *Project Misplaced*, with its cunning visual language, is a serious attempt at presenting misplaced identities in a world that is growing ever more alienating and inhospitable.

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Farhang-e loghat-e zaban-e makhfi, Mahdi Sama'i, Tehran: Nashr-e Markaz, 2003, ISBN 964-305-710-0, 116pp.

From the moment of its publication in early 2003, Mahdi Sama'i's book has become a bestseller in Iran. A year after its first appearance, it has already reached its sixth edition, and was the most-sold Persian book in Tehran's 2004 International Book Fair. In fact, its main part, a 55-page long dictionary of contemporary slang spoken by Tehrani youngsters, not only offers surprises and small gems, but, looked at as a whole, also provides a rare if anecdotal insight into contemporary Iranian life.

The dictionary is preceded by an introduction in which the author argues that, in Iran as in other countries, slang is used by specific groups, particularly by delinquents and people who wish to stay at the sideline of mainstream society. While he refers to studies of the first group (e.g. Ebrahim Nabavi's *Salon-e Shesh*), his dictionary focuses on the second group, specifically on Tehrani youngsters in their teens and early twenties. They use slang for the same basic objective as other groups: to mask the true meaning of their speech acts, and to help create a socio-cultural bond that sets them off from their social surrounding (6f.). (However, the success of the book seems to suggest that adult urban society is by no means indifferent to this phenomenon. In fact, a small number of terms—such as *hal kardan*, "to have fun," or *khat dadan*, "to make a pass at the opposite sex"—have long since become part of everyday language).

Due to the very ephemeral nature of this vocabulary, the methodology suited to its collection differs from that adapted to create normal dictionaries. The researcher is obliged to be in close touch with the social milieu in which new terms are ceaselessly created, modified, and abandoned. Sama'i interviewed youngsters from north, west, east, central and also, though less so, south Tehran for a period of four years, sampling information both in the streets and in high schools (14–19). Considering the labor, it is a pity, and perhaps the